# An Essay on Convalescence

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# Preface.

The object of that regulation in this University, requiring an essay of the candidates for the degree of Doctor of Medicine, is I suppose to receive from them a specimen of their acquirements in medicine, and giving to them in the mean time, an opportunity of investigating some of the most defective parts of that science, and thereby contribute to its improvement; but the short period generally alloted for a medical education, and the numerous and very comprehensive branches which are necessary to make it complete, renders it almost impracticable for the student to engage in experiments and observation for the elucidation of any new and difficult subject in medicine; this I acknowledge has been my situation, and therefore in this essay I shall aim at nothing original, but only give my assent to those doctrines which are in my opinion most correct and unexceptionable.

In the improvement of medicine it appears that its slow progress cannot be attributed to the want of observation

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and the recording of simple facts in the phanomena of disease but from a want of correct deductions and an useful application of them in the formation of general principles concerning the nature of disease, as a proof of this we discover in the most ancient writings on medicine a very correct history, and symptoms of disease, with which, the most acute observers of the present day agree and upon which, their most popular and distinguished doctrines at this time are founded, For an instance of this let us recur to the writings of Sydenham, which evince to us his very correct knoledge of the phanomena of disease and also the judicious application of remedies in their cure, but unfortunately he was not regulated by principles of a general nature, but only by insulated facts, hence I conclude that our science is susceptible of most improvement from a careful selection from the immense quantity of matter already furnished us and arranging it in a proper manner and thereby making it useful.

Amongst the great variety of dissertations which I have perused and also in the course of my limited reading on the subject of medicine, I discover a subject of the utmost importance to be universally neglected, which is the state of convalescence from disease and the proper management of patients during that time; this neglect in others has urged me to select it for the subject of my essay, but here as before observed I make no pretensions to originality but merely wish to introduce the subject into a more general notice and thereby induce others whose extensive observations will suffer them to treat it as it deserves. All that I have ever collected on that subject in a separate and distinct treatise, was from the professor of the practice and institutes of this university, and as his observations are I think unexceptionable I will follow him as closely as my memory and other resources will enable me.

# On Convalescence.

Before entering immediately on the subject of convalescence it is necessary in order to give a complete idea concerning the condition of the system during that state to make a few preliminary observations on the nature of disease, and to mark out a line of distinction between it and convalescence. Though it will not be improper in the first place to observe that health consists in the due performance of all those functions of the animal economy which render life most complete and perfect, necessarily depending on actions induced by the operation of stimuli on those peculiar properties with which animal matter is endowed called excitability, and sensibility, and it is necessary here to observe that the result of the impressions of stimuli on these properties constitutes what is termed excitement. In perfect health, excitement is equably diffused throughout the whole system and the stimuli belonging to all parts of the system must consequently be properly proportioned to their different degrees of excitability,

constituting healthy action. Now any cause operating on the system which destroys this equilibrium or proportion between the degree of excitability and the force of stimuli in a part of the system, must necessarily destroy the healthy and produce a morbid action or excitement in the system, which we now very properly call disease, and this variously modified and primarily occupying different parts of the system constitutes the whole of that numerous catalogue of diseases which have been brought under different classes, genera, and species, by the nosological writers.

It is a fact I think sufficiently established that in the production of disease, the causes which operate, do first induce debility, (unless this predisposing cause previously exists in the system,) the consequence of which is that predominance of excitability in the blood-vessels, which renders them much more susceptible of action from the operation of stimuli, and the causes above alluded to, (which we pre-

sume to be always stimuli) acting on this accumulated excitability produce a violent or convulsive action in the arterial system, called Fever.

In what manner excitability is preternaturally accumulated when debility is in any manner induced, I shall not here pretend to account, but merely satisfy myself with a knowledge of the fact.

In the cure of disease, which consists in morbid excitement produced as above explained, the primary object in view is to restore the equilibrium of excitement throughout the whole system, and thereby establish ordinary or healthy action in every part; the different methods employed to effectuate this, it is not in my province here to notice, but will endeavour to point out the state or condition in which the system is left after it is by any means accomplished.

We very well know that when all the symptoms which characterize disease have been nearly or entirely

eradicated from the system and the arteries have again taken on an action, which differs from health only in being rather more frequent and feeble in their pulsations, having lost that peculiar jirk which is observable in fever, general debility and its consequences always remain, more particularly, after a violent and long protracted disease, natural sympathy and association returns, and the patient is able to leave his bed; it is this particular state of the system which has been termed convalescence, and constitutes a link between disease and health; and here we discover a striking analogy between it and that state of the system which precedes the attack of disease, that is, debility, increased excitability, and of course an extreme liability to disease or morbid action from any exciting cause; various other symptoms and disorders might be here mentioned as the particular products of every grade of disease, which if minutely detailed, would go far beyond the limits contemplated in this essay, suffice it to say, that

the effects of disease are very various according to the predominance of certain predispositions in different persons, for example: if the hepatic, alimentary, lymphatic &c predispositions predominate, we will discover the ravages of disease to be manifested most evidently in the liver by obstruction &c, in the stomach and intestines by indigestion or morbid appetite, diarrhea and costiveness, and in the lymphatics by tumid and schirrhous glands &c. Though there are certain conditions of the system, which generally accompany the convalescence from all diseases and which will admit of some uniformity of treatment, of which I shall in a cursory manner take notice.

1st. We may lay it down as a maxim, that in the convalescence from all diseases whether of a high or low grade of morbid action, that debility is a necessary consequence.

2d. That the system is always more or less irritable in consequence of the accumulation of excitability, and thereby predisposed again to the attack of disease or morbid ac-

tion by the application of an exciting cause; these together with other effects of disease which are frequently obvious, may lead us to inferences by which our treatment and certain necessary precautions with our patients may be properly regulated.

I will first ask if any medical aid is necessary during convalescence? To this query I promptly answer in the affirmative, and further add, that I am very confident that it is a state of the system which is too generally and universally neglected by practitioners of medicine.

In this particular state of the system, which is weak and excitable, the first class of medicines which suggests itself to the practitioner is that of tonics, the primary objects in the administration of which, are, to remove debility, equalize excitement, and convert the accumulated excitability into open and healthy excitement; these medicines must be carefully administered in small and sometimes frequent doses, for it is obvious that a large dose of stimulating medicine by acting on

increased excitability, would excite fever or morbid action, whereas the gentle tonics will gradually wear down the excitability and establish healthy action. The most eligible of this class of medicines are,

1st. Peruvian bark; this should be given in small doses several times in the day; if it should disagree with the stomach, exhibit it in the form of Huxams tincture, decoction or infusion.

2d. The different bitters; as gentian, columbo, quassia &c either separately or variously combined with different aromatics, in the form of tinctures or decoction, the doses should be regulated according to the condition of the system, but generally a sparing use of them will answer all indications.

3d. The different preparations of iron, are admirably adapted to restore tone and vigour to the system, of which, the carbonate or rubigo ferri is to be prefered; it may be given alone or in combination with some of the above articles.

These are the tonics which may be generally employed internally, but it is proper to mention some external ones equally

important, to which belongs a properly regulated exercise; this most important tonic is above all others best calculated to expend excitability and prevent its morbid accumulation, but unless cautiously and judiciously employed it may prove extremely hurtful, by acting as the exciting cause of a relapse; which remark will equally apply to all the medicines before enumerated.

On the subject of exercise it is proper to premise a few general rules by which it should be regulated.

In the commencement of convalescence when the system is much debilitated and excitable, passive exercise should be advised, such as a rocking chair, chamber horse, swinging &c and in proportion to the increase of strength, just in the same ratio should be the increase of exercise, until the patient is able to take mixed or active exercise, as riding on horse back, walking &c in the mean time very carefully to avoid the least fatigue; also avoid exercise before breakfast, at which time the system is most debilitated, and particularly avoid ex-

ize in the night air and bad weather; under this head I shall suggest the propriety of early retirement to bed, and also warm and comfortable clothing, adapted precisely to the changes of the weather, for cold we well know is the most fruitful of all the remote causes of fever.

Diet and drinks come next to be considered: as the condition of the stomach is different according to the habit of the patient and nature of the disease, the appetite may be either morbidly increased or diminished; if the former be the case, salt meats are to be prefered, being better calculated to satiate the appetite, and most savoury to the patient, they also act as tonics to the system without disposing to plethora by rapid formation of blood, as do the more nutritious fresh meats of beef, mutton &c and different vegitable substances.

The quantity of salt meat should be small at each meal, but the intervals between meals should be short; this is what has been properly termed a reduced diet, that is, lessened in quantity but not altered in quality. There is no precaution

which should be more strongly urged in the treatment of convalescents than the necessity of avoiding intemperance in eating, because this morbid appetite invariably calls for more food than the stomach is capable of digesting, the consequence of which is the excitement of fever, for even in the healthy condition of the stomach a partial fever is always produced by a very full meal.

Proper attention should be paid to the state of the bowels, and costiveness obviated by mild laxative medicines, such as sulphur, magnesia, castor oil, and the like; also a diarrhoea should be attended to and removed by the usual remedies employed in that disease.

It is not to be understood I hope, that tonics are to be indiscriminately employed during the whole of convalescence, but on the contrary the small remains of morbid action which sometimes exists or the strong predisposition to it which attends convalescence, is most effectually and speedily removed by means of small bleedings, which tend to equalize excite-

ment and prepare the system for the most favourable and prompt operation of tonics in restoring ordinary or healthy action; and the experience of the most eminent practitioners of the new school, can testify to the fact, that the most rapid and perfect cures have followed the use of this truly invaluable remedy.

I cannot or rather must not conclude without noticing one very useful and comprehensive precaution, which is, the indispensable necessity of avoiding all the remote and exciting causes of fever, for the most obstinate and violent cases of disease, which come under the management of a physician, are those succeeding relapses, when the energy of the system has been nearly exhausted.

I now close this short and too imperfect essay, conscious that little has been done by me, though a subject of great importance. But before I take a final adieu of you, illustrious Professors, permit me to return you my most sincere thanks, for the inestimable principles which I have received from each & all of you in the

science of medicine. For it is from the most impressive evidence I add, that it is in this University, that new avenues to medical knowledge have been unfolded, and the just importance of former ones established: in which University, the genuine principles of medicine have received a developement, and a kind of demonstration hitherto unknown. And lastly, in which its students enjoy that profound liberality, and indulgence in sentiment which banishes superstition, and its concomitants blind veneration and credulity.